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UNCLAS ABU DHABI 002782

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: NO PLAN TO OPEN COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP TO WOMEN THIS YEAR

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: DESPITE PRESS REPORTS THAT THE UAE'S APPOINTED REPRESENTATIVE BODY, THE FEDERAL NATIONAL COUNCIL (FNC), MIGHT BE OPENING ITS MEMBERSHIP TO WOMEN, FNC SECRETARY GENERAL MOHAMMED AL MAZROUI TOLD POL CHIEF JUNE 14 THAT THERE WAS NO TIMELINE FOR HAVING WOMEN JOIN THE FNC BY THE TIME OF THE NEXT SESSION IN NOVEMBER 2005. HE CONFIRMED, HOWEVER, THAT THERE ARE A NUMBER OF EFFORTS UNDER WAY TO PREPARE WOMEN FOR POLITICAL LIFE, AND THAT WOMEN'S MEMBERSHIP IN THE FNC WAS "INEVITABLE." HOWEVER, A MORE IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENT WOULD BE TO GIVE THE FNC MORE LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY, AL MAZROUI SAID, ECHOING WHAT UAE ACADEMICS AND SOME FNC MEMBERS HAVE TOLD EMBASSY OFFICERS IN RECENT YEARS. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) ON JUNE 14, POL CHIEF AND POL ASSISTANT CALLED ON FNC SECRETARY GENERAL AL MAZROUI TO DISCUSS THE POSSIBILITY THAT

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THE FNC MIGHT EXPAND ITS MEMBERSHIP TO WOMEN, AS WELL AS THE ROLE OF THE FNC IN TRAINING UAE WOMEN TO SERVE IN POLITICAL LIFE. AL MAZROUI SAID THAT THERE IS NO PLAN FOR HAVING WOMEN BECOME FNC MEMBERS WHEN THE NEW SESSION CONVENES IN NOVEMBER 2005. HOWEVER, AL MAZROUI SAID THAT HE HAD GIVEN A LECTURE AT THE GENERAL WOMEN'S UNION (GWU) IN 2004 ON THE TOPIC OF THE FNC'S ROLE, AND THAT SOME UAE WOMEN HAD ATTENDED FNC SESSIONS ON OCCASION TO BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE BODY'S PROCEEDINGS. HE SAID THAT UAE WOMEN STILL HAVE "MUCH TO LEARN" ABOUT THE FNC. WITHIN FIVE YEARS, HE ADDED, IT IS "INEVITABLE" THAT MEMBERSHIP WOULD BE OPEN TO WOMEN. THE CONSTITUTION ALLOWS WOMEN TO JOIN THE FNC, HE SAID, NOTING THAT THERE WERE A NUMBER OF UAE WOMEN CAPABLE OF JOINING THE PARLIAMENT. SHEIKHA FATIMA, WIFE OF THE LATE PRESIDENT SHEIKH ZAYED AND PRESIDENT OF GWU, A VOCAL PROONENT FOR WOMEN, LIKEWISE DID NOT GIVE A TIMELINE FOR UAE WOMEN JOINING THE FNC WHEN THE AMBASSADOR CALLED ON HER JUNE 13 AND SPECIFICALLY ASKED ABOUT THIS ISSUE. (NOURA AL SUWEIDI WAS THERE TOO, BUT MADE NO COMMENT.)

¶3. (SBU) AL MAZROUI ALSO SAID THAT ELECTIONS OF MEMBERS TO THE FNC WAS SOMETHING THAT WAS "INEVITABLE" IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS, BUT NOT LIKELY BY NOVEMBER 2005. AS ONE WHO HAS SERVED IN THE CAPACITY OF SECRETARY GENERAL FOR THE PAST 12 YEARS, AL MAZROUI SAID HE BELIEVED THAT WHAT THE FNC NEEDED MOST WAS GREATER AUTHORITY TO PROPOSE AND APPROVE LEGISLATION. CURRENTLY, THE FNC HAS LITTLE MORE THAN A RUBBER STAMP AUTHORITY. AL MAZROUI EXPLAINED THAT IT WOULD BE UP TO THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF RULERS (COMPRISED OF THE RULERS OF THE SEVEN EMIRATES) TO EMPOWER THE FNC.

¶4. (U) UAE WOMEN ARE POISED TO RECEIVE PARLIAMENTARY TRAINING UNDER THE ARAB WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS PROJECT UNVEILED DURING A MAY 30-31 SYMPOSIUM ORGANIZED BY THE GENERAL WOMEN'S UNION. THE PROJECT WILL INCLUDE WOMEN FROM THE UAE AND EIGHT MENA COUNTRIES. THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT WILL FUND PARTICIPANTS FROM GULF COUNTRIES AND THE SWEDISH GOVERNMENT WILL FUND PARTICIPANTS FROM OTHER MENA COUNTRIES. THE PROGRAM WILL FOCUS ON PUBLIC SPEAKING, LOBBYING, AND CREATING POLITICAL ALLIANCES. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, GWU DIRECTOR NOURA AL SUWEIDI TOLD SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS THAT THE PROJECT'S GOAL OVER THREE YEARS IS TO INCREASE THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN DIFFERENT WALKS OF LIFE, INCLUDING POLITICS. SHE ADDED THAT GWU AND THE FNC HAVE BEEN HOLDING SESSIONS FOR THE PAST FEW MONTHS TO PREPARE UAE WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN PARLIAMENTARY WORK. AL SUWEIDI, UAE UNIVERSITY POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR DR. IBTISAM AL KITBI, AND HESSA OMRAH, A SENIOR MFA OFFICIAL AND PROTOCOL OFFICER FOR THE WIFE OF DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SHEIKH HAMDAN BIN ZAYED, ARE AMONG THE WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN SELECTED TO THE PROJECT'S STEERING COMMITTEE, ACCORDING TO RUBA AL HASSAN, UNDP PROJECT COORDINATOR.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: OVER THE YEARS, SHEIKHA FATIMA HAS FREQUENTLY MADE PUBLIC STATEMENTS CALLING FOR OPENING MEMBERSHIP ON THE FNC TO WOMEN, AND THE ARAB WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS PROJECT IS CERTAINLY A HOPEFUL INITIATIVE IN THIS DIRECTION. HOWEVER, FROM WHAT THE FNC SECGEN IS SAYING, WE WILL NOT WITNESS THESE CHANGES THIS YEAR.
SISON